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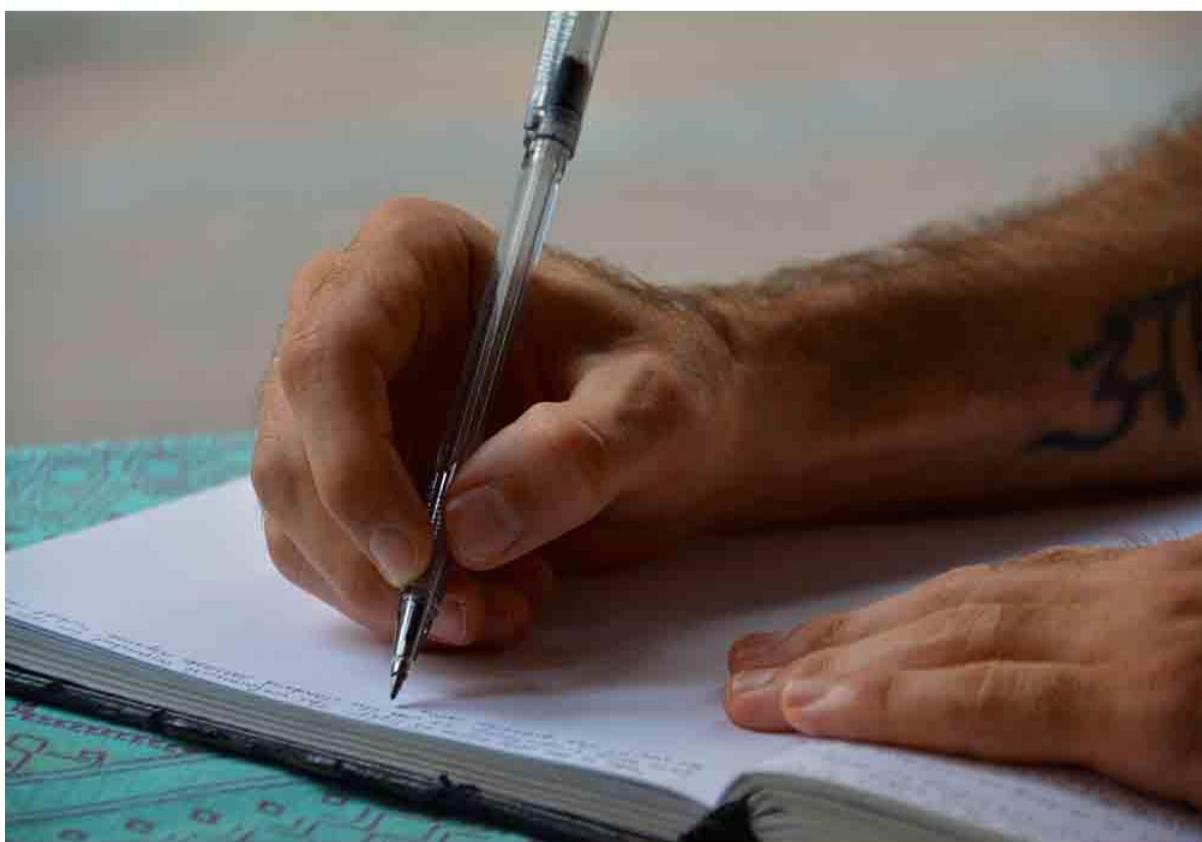
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### **The Reality of Life in Kamala Das's *Sweet Milk***

#### **Abstract**

The short story *Sweet Milk* is the translated work of Kamala Das's Malayalam work "Neipayasam" a quite moving story of a family; a father, a mother and three sons. The story was narrated from omniscient point of view, focused on the unnamed father character, the protagonist of the story. The father character in this story revealed as a universal figure for all men who lose their wives and worry about how to cope without their partners. "Neipayasam" reflects the condition of a father who seems hopeless and mentally handicapped after his wife's death. It illustrates the importance of a mother and the emotional combat of a father for his own life and his three boys.

**Key Words:** death, agony, emotional conflict, fatherhood.

The story is about the untimely death of a young mother leaving her innocent three kids and loving husband in ocean of sorrow. The story begins with the woman's husband who returns back after the cremation and funeral of his wife. On the way back home by bus, sitting in the bus among strangers, he reminiscing the events that happened that day morning; how she made the boys to wake up, how he started his day with sweet aroma of coffee made

by his wife. "Unniye, don't go on sleeping covered up like that. It's Monday." She was calling the eldest son. She then moved to the kitchen, her white sari crumpled. Brought me a big glass of coffee. Then? (1)". He cannot able to remember what she told at that time.

"Don't go on sleeping covered up like that. It's Monday." These lines only lingered in his mind. He chanted these lines himself as prayers. He was totally broken when he realizes that hereafter no one is there to care him .He thinks about how "She brought them their tiffin in small aluminium boxes" and the "smear of turmeric on her right hand" (1).

Their marriage is a love marriage after "a courtship of year or two". They married against their parent's wishes, but they never regret it. They enjoyed their life with the fullest amid many ups and downs. "Lack of money, the children's spells of illness — they were often dejected. She became careless of her appearance. To an extent, he lost the ability to laugh. Still, they loved each other" (2). They blessed together with three children who also loved them. Their first son Unni aged10, second child Balan aged 7 and the youngest son Rajan is of 5 years.

Three boys whose faces were always smeared with dirt, who had neither outstanding beauty nor brilliance. But the mother and the father said to each other —"Unni is always making things. He has a taste for engineering." "We should make Balan a doctor. See his forehead: such a wide forehead denotes intelligence."

"Rajan is not afraid of the dark. He is smart. He should join the army."(3)

Their affection towards their children and their expectation about their future reflects a typical Indian parent.

They lived in a three-room flat on the first floor in a narrowed street in the city. The mother grows a paneer plant, a kind of rose plant, which has not flowered yet. The description of the kitchen which is common among Indian kitchen gives detailed observation

of the author. Every part in the kitchen has the touch of the mother and each thing speaks the personality of her. "In the kitchen, brass spatulas and ladles hang from the hooks on the wall. A wooden plank lies near the stove. Mother usually sits there, making *chapatis* when Father returns from work". (3)

He felt a sharp pain in the knee while he got off from the bus. He fears that it might be the beginning of arthritis and worries about his children's future. "He got off when the bus stopped. He felt a twinge of pain in the knee. The beginning of arthritis? Who will look after the children if I am bedridden? Suddenly, his tears welled up. He rubbed his face with a dirty kerchief and quickened his step" (4). He never imagined that his life would meet a sudden fall overnight. He outpours his love towards his wife with tears. "Did I know? No. Did I ever imagine that she would suddenly fall down one evening and die, without saying farewell to anyone?"

He had looked in through the kitchen window when he returned back from the work. She was not there. Children were playing in the front yard. He opened the door with his spare key. It was then he saw her lying on the floor unconscious. "She was lying on the floor. Her lips were parted". He thought she might have slipped, but at the hospital doctor declared: "She died an hour and a half ago. It was heart failure" (4). He felt like earth slipped beneath his feet. "He was swept by a welter of emotions". He was not able to accept the reality. He felt anger with her for no reasons. This is one of the steps to ease pain of the loss of the beloved ones. He blabbered "How could she go, without any warning, burdening me with all the responsibilities!" (5).

As per the Indian scenario, women have to take care of household responsibilities whereas men have been only of financial support to the family. Here the situation of the father takes a different turn that there is no choice of escape the reality. He suffers a lot of mental conflict and takes the task which is alien to him. He is unaware of likes, preferences,

taste of the children which was taken care only by the mother. He was limited to himself to his work and material benefits of the family. "Now who would bathe the children? Who would cook for them? Who would look after them when they fell ill?" (5).

His loss is beyond words; unbearable, unimaginable, unbelievable. He wished this to be a dream, he feared to face the reality. He says,

"My wife died," he whispered to himself, "my wife died suddenly today of a heart attack. I need two days' leave". A great leave application. Leave, not because the wife is ill. Leave, because the wife is dead. The boss might call him to his room. He might express his sorrow. His sorrow! Who wants it? He didn't know her. He didn't know her hair that curled at the ends, her tired smile, her slow step. All these are his losses" (4)

He thinks about his children. "Have the children gone to sleep? Had they eaten anything, or had they just cried themselves to sleep?". They were too young to digest the death of their mother. They were very innocent to understand the meaning of death. "But they are too young to understand. Unni just stood there watching me when I put her in the taxi. Only the youngest one cried. But that was because he wanted to get into the taxi too. Certainly, they did not know the meaning of death" (6).

The father arrives home and two of his boys are waiting for him. The middle boy is sleeping. When he opened the door, the youngest son came running asking about his mother. "Mother isn't back yet," "When will Mother come back? Isn't she better?". He consoled that she will return back. He doesn't want to ruin the little boys last night of normal sleep and he let the truth wait for the next day. "Let the truth wait for another day, he thought. There was no point in giving grief to the child tonight". When he finds out that the boys didn't have their dinner yet, he went inside the kitchen to fix their meal where he finds "*Chapatis*, rice, potato curry, chips, curds - the food she had made. In a glass bowl, the *neipayasam* that she

sometimes made for the children" (6). Unaware of her death, besides her usual preparation, she specially made her signature dish, Neipayasam, a coconut milk recipe with so much love, her last legacy for her children, but he didn't want to serve that food as it is touched by death. So he decides to make uppumavu, a south Indian dish.

Rajan finds out the dishes in the kitchen and especially Neipayasam, their favorite dish the mother left for. He exclaimed happily digging his finger in the payasam and tasting it. "Achha, *neipayasam*," Rajan exclaimed happily. He dipped a finger in it. When he saw the happiness in the boys face, he let them eat as it was the last dish their mother would ever make and they would never be able to taste their mother's cooking again.

He sat down on the wooden plank where his wife usually sat.

"Unni, will you serve? Achhan does not feel too good. Headache."

Let them eat. They would never again be able to eat their mother's cooking.

They started eating the *payasam*. He sat motionless, watching them.

"Don't you want rice, Unni?"

"No, we want only *payasam*. It's very tasty."

"Yes, Mother has made splendid *neipayasam*," Rajan said happily. (7)

The children enjoyed their food appreciating their mother for making their favorite food. He fights off his tears as he doesn't want to show his emotions in front of his children. "He got up and walked quickly towards the bathroom". The tears are not just for himself, but for the children who going to miss their mother forever. *Sweet Milk* is a sensitive story of a mother's death and the emotional struggle of the husband which makes the story more poignant. His wife's death is a great blow for him and his future stands as a nightmare before him with lots of questions, demand and commitments.

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